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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 001205

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: Opposition Chooses Single Candidate

Refs: (A) Minsk 836, (B) Minsk 1099

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Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The 10+ coalition, by far Belarus' largest opposition group, held its Congress of Democratic Forces in Minsk October 1 and 2 and narrowly chose Aleksandr Milinkevich to be its single candidate to challenge President Lukashenko in the July 2006 elections. This congress was the culmination of a selection process the 10+ began in June (reftels), and marked the official start of the 10+'s presidential campaign. The process itself appeared democratic and well run, and most participants seemed pleased with Milinkevich's victory. However, others agreed he would be a good president, in a normal democracy, but might not have what it takes to beat Lukashenko ("He's no Yeltsin!"). The 10+ also does not appear ready to begin immediately its campaign, and some pointed out other opposition candidates would likely announce themselves. End summary.

¶2. (C) The 10+, which unites nearly all of Belarus pro-democracy political parties and a number of NGOs, had applied at a number of venues to hold the congress in Belarus. After being denied from every one, they started planning the congress to be in Ukraine or Russia. Against all expectations, Lukashenko surprisingly announced on September 8 the 10+ could hold its congress in Minsk (ref B). Despite having less than a month to plan, the congress came off without any major problems. In fact, the congress appeared to be very well planned and run. The Right Alliance youth NGO even provided 40 of its members, armed with radios, to provide security to the event and the subsequent winner. Vintsuk Vyachorka, head of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), told Econoff there had been several problems behind the scenes, but would not elaborate.

#### The Participants

¶3. (C) The Congress of Democratic Forces brought together 813 pro-democracy delegates and a number of guests and observers from across Belarus and neighboring countries. Several Members of the European Parliament, from Slovakia, the Netherlands and Sweden, attended, as did a member of the Ukrainian parliament and an advisor to FM Tarasyuk, and representatives of Russia's Union of Right Forces (who offered 2,000 volunteers to help bring democracy to

Belarus). The Czech MFA sent a small delegation. Although the European Commission did not send anyone to observe, Alistair Rabagliati, an EC official from the Moscow TACIS office who is dating a Belarusian and is friends with IRI's Belarus officer, came on his own. He said even though he was not there in an official capacity he would write a report on the congress for Brussels. Two MPs from Poland's Law and Justice Party, Filip Libicki and Norbert Napieraj, were denied entry to Belarus at the border. The Congress also accredited 160 journalists, including many from Poland, Lithuania, Russia, Denmark and the Netherlands, as well as Belarusian state TV.

#### Milinkevich Wins by a Hair

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¶4. (C) The 10+ coalition invited 839 delegates to attend. Several contacts reported that many delegates, namely schoolteachers, had been ordered to work on Saturday, forcing them to miss the first day. The belief was the regime had tried to prevent them from attending. Regardless, most of these did arrive on Sunday, when 813 delegates were present.

¶5. (SBU) In his introductory speech former head of state Stanislav Shushkevich announced he would step down as a potential candidate, but support whomever wins, to great cheers from the crowd. In the first round of voting Ratusha NGO leader Aleksandr Milinkevich received 383 votes, United Civic Party head Anatoly Lebedko 263, and (pro-democracy) Communist Sergey Kalyakin 152, with 3 ballots spoiled and 12 voting against all. The congress broke for lunch and started the second round of voting, between Lebedko and Milinkevich, immediately thereafter. In this round Milinkevich won with 399 votes, to Lebedko's 391, with 3 ballots spoiled, 3 not turned in and 13 against

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both. Milinkevich therefore beat Lebedko by one percent of the vote, and became the 10+'s single candidate having received just under half the delegates' support.

¶6. (SBU) In his acceptance speech Milinkevich announced he would fight Lukashenko to the end of the campaign and called for unity among all the opposition. At a subsequent press conference Milinkevich attempted to defuse criticism that he is too western-oriented: "Relations with Russia are very important for us. Russia is our strategic partner, with which we have inseparable ties," (more on Milinkevich septel).

¶7. (SBU) The independent election observation NGO Partnership observed both vote counts and informed Econoff that the voting and count had been conducted in a democratic manner. Additionally, the press was allowed to observe freely both the vote and the count. No journalists are known to have reported any problems.

#### Cracks in the Unity

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¶8. (C) The 10+'s four presidential hopefuls and their supporters were all given the chance to speak, as did a number of other 10+ members. Several opposition figures who remain outside the 10+ process, such as schoolmaster and NGO leader Vladimir Kolas, former Respublika MP Valery Frolov and former opposition presidential candidate Vladimir Goncharik, also spoke. Notably missing were most members of the Free Belarus coalition. In general the speeches all called for greater unity in the opposition, although many stressed that the hard work of campaigning had yet to begin. Frolov and Dmitry Dashkevich of Malady Front both made significant gaffes, with Frolov announcing that nationalists are fascists and Dashkevich claiming

Malady Front would work with any candidate, except a communist.

¶9. (C) Although everyone called for unity in public, several participants privately told Emboffs of potential problems in the opposition. Kolas stressed to Econoff that this congress chose only the 10+'s candidate, not the opposition's candidate, and said many do not agree with the 10+ process. Several delegates backing the UCP's Lebedko discussed with Pol/Econ Chief their fundamental differences with Milinkevich's apparent priorities Q i.e. resurrection of the Belarusian language and culture and closer ties with the West. Ales Karnienko, a Belarusian nationalist and NGO leader from Gomel, complained that Milinkevich would be the worst possible candidate for the opposition as he lacks energy and the ability to work with others. Several people decried what they called Milinkevich's inept management of Domash's presidential campaign in 2001. Several others said they had voted for Milinkevich, but only because he was the least objectionable candidate. They complained that none of these candidates were known to the Belarusian people, and questioned their ability to conduct a successful campaign. Perspektiva leader Anatoly Shemchenko told Econoff before the event he decided to boycott, because his group decided participating in the elections would be futile. Despite these negative statements, the vast majority of participants seemed pleased, or at least accepting, of the results. [Comment: As they should, as this congress almost entirely consisted of 10+ members.]

#### State Media Provocations; The Opposition is Gay?

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¶10. (SBU) The decision to allow Belarusian state TV to participate quickly led to several regime provocations. On the first day a troupe of self-proclaimed homosexuals appeared outside to announce their support for the opposition. State TV seized on this (if they did not plan it) and on October 1 aired commentary focusing on the opposition's "homosexual platform." On October 2 state TV continued its mockery of the congress with a cartoon and the slogan, "Belarus to Europe, through the a\*\*," (more on media reaction septel). In another clearly staged incident, a bystander threw sour cream in the face of former head of state Stanislav Shushkevich, shouting, "This is for what you did to my country!!", just as a state TV cameraman appeared to film Shushkevich. This will no doubt be aired in clips commiserating over the fall of the USSR.

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#### Resolutions

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¶11. (C) As this was by far the largest gathering of pro-democracy forces in Belarus in years, the congress took the opportunity to vote on a number of other issues. Most importantly, the congress voted to jointly support whichever candidate won, to pool the coalition's resources, and to abstain from nominating competing candidates. [Note: Until now the 10+ had been an informal coalition of party leaders. This was the first time coalition membership was put to a vote by party members.] The congress also agreed to support the Belarusian language, urge Lukashenko not to seek re-election, and for the GOB to conduct free and fair elections. The only controversy came in an argument about creating a commission to investigate previous political disappearances.

#### Just the Beginning

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¶12. (C) Comment: The choice of Milinkevich has advantages

and disadvantages. Of the four candidates, he was clearly the weakest public speaker, lacking energy and a strong message. He is also routinely criticized for his heavy-handed and ineffective management of the 2001 Domash presidential campaign. On the other hand, he brings to the table a network of NGO supporters across Belarus, he lacks the stigma of belonging to a political party (even though he was nominated by the widely reviled BPF), and he has not yet been a target of Lukashenko's propaganda attack machine. He also has leadership experience, having been the deputy mayor of Grodno in the mid-1990s. As several congress participants put it, "He would be a good president, in a normal country, but he might not have what it takes to challenge Lukashenko."

113. (C) Comment cont'd: As many of those participating in the congress acknowledged, the selection of a single candidate was just the first step in the 10+ coalition's presidential campaign. More important will be how the 10+ advertises its candidate and reaches out to a skeptical populace, particularly in the face of increasingly shrill pro-Lukashenko propaganda. A number of 10+ leaders admitted campaigning must start immediately, but all made it clear few plans were in place to do so. However, the BPF's Vyachorka pointed out that once the 10+ starts to campaign it should have an easier time as Belarusians always ask, "If not Lukashenko, then who?"; the opposition finally has a name to give as an alternative. Milinkevich himself seemed at a loss in his acceptance speech, not taking the opportunity to enunciate a clear message or fire up the troops. We can only hope he finds his footing soon.

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